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## Patrimony: Nat Bodian

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# And We Weren't There

A Brush with Patrimony

By Nat Bodian, Publisher's Marketing Consultant

A New York City radio station invites listeners to phone in "brushes with greatness: and the usual call-in goes something like this:

"My hairdresser's daughter-in-law has a brother who once delivered a cake to Danny Thomas's wife."

My "brush with greatness" concerns Philip Roth and his recently-published bestseller *Patrimony*, which delves in detail into his life and relationship with his father, Herman Roth, a retired insurance agent from Elizabeth, New Jersey.

I first encountered Philip Roth's work in 1959 when he burst upon the literary scene with his National Book Award winner, *Goodbye Columbus*. I was head of sales and promotion at Baker & Taylor in Hillside, New Jersey, then. We did a land office business promoting and selling 29-year old Philip Roth's title to bookstores and libraries.

In the early 1960s, I belonged to the health club of the Newark (NJ) YMHA and particularly enjoyed the steam room where four of us occasionally sat together in the steam and chatted. Our common denominator was a tie to books.

I was then head of marketing and production at American Elsevier Publishing Company. Another of the four had a scientist son who had authored a book in the life sciences that was part of an Elsevier series I was actively promoting. The third, Jack Zylberman, sewed vests in a garment factory. In his free time, by hand, he was writing a book on his experiences as a Holocaust survivor. He wrote in Jewish, as he was most comfortable with this language. The fourth was Herman Roth, who loved to talk about his author son, Philip, the various celebrities Philip was meeting as the result of his fame as an author. He was particularly proud

of the fact that his son's publisher had advanced Philip \$5,000 on a novel which his son had been researching for a year, but not yet started writing.

Over 25 years later, in early August 1987, I was now a health club member in the Union (NJ) YMHA. The Newark 'Y' had ceased to exist shortly after the Newark riots of the late 1960s and the building was used as an adjunct of a nearby public school.

I was now in my 12th year as marketing manager at Wiley, had seven books published in the previous eight years and one in production, and was eight months from retirement.

I slipped over to the 'Y' steam room one Sunday morning in between finishing first proofs of my eighth book, *How to Choose a Winning Title*. In the steam room, I again found myself sitting with Herman Roth. He seemed quiet and subdued until I brought up the subject of his son, Philip. He told me he heard from Philip regularly, and I asked him if he could put me in touch with Philip.

I've just written a book on book titling, I told him. I'd like to ask your son if he had any unusual experiences in selecting the titles of his books that I might incorporate into my newest work. I asked the elder Mr. Roth for his son's address.

He suggested I'd best communicate with Philip through his son's publisher Farrar, Strauss & Giroux. He told me his son's editor at Farrar had taken him out to dinner the previous weekend and would see that my letter was promptly forwarded.

That afternoon I wrote to Philip Roth, c/o Farrar, Strauss & Giroux, Inc. "Good Morning, Philip," I wrote, "May I introduce myself—Nat Bodian, by day a marketing manager at Wiley; in my offhours a writer and author of

eight books — mainly marketing related and for the book industry."

I went on to tell Roth about my promotion of his first book at Baker & Taylor, about how his father and I had had many conversations over the years in our mutual memberships in two health clubs. Then I popped the question:

"If you'd care to comment or perhaps provide an anecdote on one of your book titles, or how you came up with a particular book title, I will be appreciative of your help."

I added: "I'm particularly interested in whether your initial or 'working' titles wound up being the final titles of your books and if not, how the changes came about."

My letter, dated August 8, 1987, went into the mail the next morning. I never heard from Philip Roth. I never saw Herman Roth at the 'Y' health club again either.

*How to Choose a Winning Title*, was published in January, 1988, by Oryx Press. In the Introduction, I list unlikely locales that provided tips and leads for material in the book. I mention the Wiley elevators, a bus, an airplane, and a health club in Union, New Jersey.

Postscript: Jack Zylberman eventually completed his book on the Holocaust. After his retirement about ten years ago, he painstakingly translated his book into English, and one-finger typed an English-language submittable manuscript. Eventually, he obtained a computer and produced computer-generated copies which were submitted and rejected by about a dozen publishers. He has also given numerous talks based on the experiences in his book, which is dedicated to the six sisters and his parents, who failed to survive. I see him often at the 'Y'. ♣